



Wildlife Tree Stewardship Program – Okanagan-Similkameen SPECIES FACTSHEET

The Wildlife Tree Stewardship Program, also known as WiTS, is a voluntary program that conserves wildlife tree habitats through volunteer monitoring (of wildlife trees and bird activity), landowner agreements, and community education. It was first established on Vancouver Island through the Federation of BC Naturalists and has recently expanded to include the Lower Mainland and Okanagan-Similkameen. In the Okanagan-Similkameen, WiTS will focus on five bird species at risk. This fact sheet introduces one of our regions target species, the Williamson's Sapsucker. By identifying and monitoring nest sites for this sapsucker, WiTS aims to assist its recovery and help protect its habitat.



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Williamson's Sapsucker

What is a Williamson's Sapsucker?

Williamson's Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus thyroideus*) has the most restricted distribution and lowest abundance of the four species of sapsuckers occurring in British Columbia. It prefers mature Western Larch (*Larix occidentalis*) forests, with the bulk of its provincial range located in the south Okanagan. Williamson's Sapsucker is **Endangered** in Canada due to its restricted range, low population size, dependency on mature forests and the threat of habitat loss. Approximately 300 – 500 pairs breed in BC's Southern Interior.

DESCRIPTION:

- **Males** have a black head, body and breast; narrow white stripes on the head; a red chin and throat; yellow belly; and a white rump and large white wing patch.
- **Females** have a brown head and wings with white bars; large dark patch on the breast, a white rump and a variably yellow belly.
- Body length: 23cm (9")
- Calls include the "cheeur" call and the scold (sounds like a soft "churr") given near the nest or sap trees. Tapping consists of a series of irregular, broken rhythm blows.

DIET:

- Feeds on sap and tree cambium during the pre-nesting period and mainly carpenter ants after young hatch. There are no standard arrangements to sap holes.

HABITAT:

- Forages in mature forests at moderately high elevations of 850-1500m
- Most abundant in Western Larch forests but will also utilize Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* var. *glauca*), Lodgepole Pine (*Pinus contorta* var. *latifolia*), Ponderosa Pine (*P. ponderosa*) and aspen stands
- Nest cavities are round and 1-42 m above ground in dead or decaying trees, primarily larch in the Okanagan region
- Although Williamson's sapsuckers are primary cavity nesters, they are weak excavators, requiring dead trees or live trees with advanced heartwood decay

SIMILAR SPECIES:

- **RED-NAPED SAPSUCKER** (*Sphyrapicus nuchalis*) Similar markings to the Williamson's Sapsucker male, but with red streaking on the top of the head as well as the back of the neck/head.
- **NORTHERN FLICKER** (*Colaptes auratus*) The barred pattern on the wings resembles the Williamson's Sapsucker female, but the flicker's barring is dark brown on light brown wings. The Northern Flicker also has a red stripe on the side of the head.

How can I help Williamson's Sapsuckers?

Habitat Threats

Williamson's Sapsuckers are the only vertebrate species in the south Okanagan whose preferred habitat is Western Larch/Douglas-fir forest. Their populations are limited by the amount of suitable breeding areas. The primary habitat threat is logging of old growth Western Larch stands on both crown and private lands. Currently, very little suitable habitat is adequately protected to meet the requirements of Williamson's Sapsuckers – less than 2% of breeding sites are contained within existing protected lands.

You can help improve Williamson's Sapsucker habitat by:

- conserving existing mature mixed coniferous forests, especially large diameter Western Larch, Douglas-fir and Ponderosa Pine trees suitable for cavity nesting, foraging for carpenter ants and drilling for sap.
- retaining standing dead trees within the preferred habitat.
- cutting firewood responsibly. Under the Ministry of Forests and Range, *Free Use Permit for Firewood*, only standing dead trees less than 40 cm in diameter or 30 m tall may be cut for firewood. Do not cut any trees with 'Wildlife Tree' signs, active nests or other signs of activity.
- placing stewardship conservation agreements or covenants on your land to protect wildlife tree patches and important wildlife habitat.

Monitoring

Williamson's Sapsuckers:

- are active in BC from late-March/early-April through mid-September. Males arrive ~ 2 weeks prior to females. Pair bonds are formed in the spring on the mating territory, and often do not persist beyond one year.
- breed between 850 and 1500 m elevation.
- lay clutches of 5-6 eggs from late-April to late-May. Nestlings are present from early-May to mid-July.

For more information on WiTS:

Lisa Scott, Regional Coordinator

Ph: (250) 404-0115 Email: witsos@shaw.ca

To report woodpecker sightings:

Bird Studies Canada: (250) 496-4049 or

Partners in Flight BC/Yukon at (250) 490-8286



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Did you know?

Due to the dramatic difference in appearance between the male and female, Williamson's sapsucker were first considered two separate species. The male was called the Williamson's sapsucker, while the female was called a Black-breasted Woodpecker.

Williamson's Sapsuckers regurgitate food to the young for the first week, after which they are fed directly from the bill.



South Okanagan-Similkameen Stewardship Program



HABITAT CONSERVATION TRUST FUND

